

Ishmael Reed: Okay. Lamont.

Lamont Steptoe: Uh huh?

Ishmael Reed: How much does your war experience enter into your writing?

Lamont Steptoe: Um, well, I would say all the time Ishmael because, you know, I suffer from PTSD and um and then I've had three bouts of cancer based upon my exposure to Agent Orange, um, so it's um, it's uh, I have to take medication to go to sleep. So for the last twenty-five years um Vietnam has become a more profound aspect of my life because of the stuff that I have to suffer physically for having gone over there.

Ishmael Reed: Before you went had you read the experiences of Black soldiers in the Revolutionary War through World War II and Korea?

Lamont Steptoe: No. No.

Ishmael Reed: You hadn't read that?

Lamont Steptoe: No, I read Wilfred Owen.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, yeah.

Lamont Steptoe: And I read Allen Spieker and I read about Hemmingway, all about putting themselves in harms way and in my eighteen year old mind I felt that to be a great writer you had to put yourself in harms way and if you survive you'll have an authority that nobody would be able to question. But also, the Korean War, my second cousin was killed in the Korean War and died in captivity. We still haven't gotten his body back. My mother talked to me all my life about her youngest brother, my Uncle Eugene, serving in World War II and being involved in the "D" Day landing. His whole unit was wiped out except him and the chaplain and they survived by pulling the dead on top of themselves.

Ishmael Reed: So you hadn't read John A. Williams or John O'Killens, about their war experiences, like John A. Williams talked about how the Black troops, the Buffalo Soldiers were sacrificed in Italy.

Lamont Steptoe: Ishmael, I didn't know anything about Black writers except the brother who wrote "The Creation of James Weldon Johnson." I went to predominately White schools and I never heard Langston Hugh's name until I got to college. I had no concept about anything about Black writers.

Ishmael Reed: So you didn't know anything about how Black soldiers would be treated in a war like Vietnam.

Lamont Steptoe: No.

Ishmael Reed: When did you realize that? The difference between how Black soldiers and White soldiers were treated? How soon did you realize that?

Lamont Steptoe: I really began to realize it at Officer Candidate School and someone, uh, a commander said I tried to write a bad check, which I hadn't and I accosted them about being racist and they said, "There's only one color in the United States Army and that's O.D. Green." But while I was there in Columbus, Georgia, I went to visit a friend of mine in my first OCS Company. I got recycled from the twelfth week cycle back to the fifth week because I failed my Math reading test three times, so they sent me to another company. I had to work my way back up, I got to two weeks when I was commissioned, so I went to visit him one day, in Columbus Georgia, and I wasn't in his house ten minutes when I heard the landlady screaming, "Get that nigger out of my house; get that nigger out of my house."

Ishmael Reed: Even though you were fighting to save her a**.

Lamont Steptoe: Right. But it just became more apparent. I began to pay attention to the statistics, like 16% of the front line troops in Vietnam were African American...

Ishmael Reed: Disproportionate to the numbers in the population.

Lamont Steptoe: Yes.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Lamont Steptoe: I began to pay attention to that. I had a sergeant when I was in OCS who threatened me because he was upset over seeing the images of Jim Brown with Raquel Welch in *Playboy Magazine* and he went off.

Ishmael Reed: So what did that you have to do with you?

Lamont Steptoe: Because I had the magazine and, you know, and he was a good old Southern boy.

Ishmael Reed; So how did he express it? How did he express it? His anger. How did he express it? Did he say something to you or how did he do it?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. He told me that he would cut my head off.

Ishmael Reed: Because you had the magazine?

Lamont Steptoe: Um hm.

Ishmael Reed: And what was your response to him?

Lamont Steptoe: I was appalled. I mean he was...there was nothing I could do, he was over me as a sergeant. All I could do was be...I was in shock.

Ishmael Reed: So he took the magazine away or what happened?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, he took the magazine away.

Ishmael Reed: So what are the most flagrant examples that you can recall about the racism against Black soldiers, I mean, did anyone get killed over the fact that the army was racist?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, you know, when I resigned from OCS before I became a lieutenant because they told us, "If you drop out of OCS after we spent all this money, you are going to walk right over to combat for patrol in Vietnam." So in OCS you're pay grade is E5, sergeant's pay, okay? Even though you're leaving they could let you keep that, but my company commander was so upset with my letter of resignation that he wisted me back to E2, which I had made out of basic and sent me to Scout Dog school? What's the mission of a scout dog? To walk to the combat patrols in Vietnam. There were very few Blacks in my OCS Company.

Ishmael Reed: What did you say in the resignation letter?

Lamont Steptoe: I told them basically that I didn't want to go to Vietnam to order men to die. They were very upset with that.

Ishmael Reed: They're also upset because you could articulate that? They were upset about you writing that, too, right?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Lamont Steptoe: And my attack officer called me into his office. His name was Raymond Patterson, ironically and he called me into his office, he was a good old boy from Tennessee, and he said, "I hate quitters," and I explained to him, I said, "Sir, I'm not a quitter. I just don't want to order men to die." So he put me through all of these physical machinations in his office, and when I left his office there was a big puddle of my sweat on the floor.

Ishmael Reed: What do you mean physical machinations?

Lamont Steptoe: You know, push ups, dying cockroach, all these various things that we did in physical training.

Ishmael Reed: You're talking about dead bug. I know that exercise. Dead bug exercise? Dying cockroach.

Lamont Steptoe: And so, um, I was the only Black person in OCS to resign. All the other officers who resigned with me were White.

Ishmael Reed: So where was OCS located again? What city?

Lamont Steptoe: OCS Infantry was Fort Benning, Georgia.

Ishmael Reed: You lived in a private residence or you lived on the base?

Lamont Steptoe: We lived in the barracks.

Ishmael Reed: Barracks. How did you get along with the White soldiers?

Lamont Steptoe: I didn't really have a problem with the White soldiers. Who I had problems with Ishmael in basic training were twenty-five Black soldiers from D.C. and when I got to my basic training unit the drill sergeant when he heard the name "Steptoe" he said, "Who's Steptoe?" and I raised my hands and he said to me, "Are there any pointed questions about my older brother who was a lifer, and when I answered the questions affirmatively, he said, "I was in Vietnam with your brother." Well that very same week...

Ishmael Reed: Korea.

Lamont Steptoe: Excuse me?

Ishmael Reed: In Korea.

Lamont Steptoe. No. Vietnam.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. Go on.

Lamont Steptoe: So then that very same week, you know, they told me because of my scores in basic training, because I had been an ROTC when I left Temple University, they said, "Hey, do you have (inaudible)?" and I raised my hand and they made me an Acting Jack, you know an Acting Sergeant, which means I didn't have to do KD, I didn't have full guard duty and I gave other people orders, you see. So after that happened these Black soldiers said to me, "We're about to give you a blanket party," and I said, "what?" I didn't know what a blanket party was. They said, "We're going to give you a blanket party because we don't like you because you talk like you're White. You're gung ho, you're going to OCS," and so one night fifteen of them came and beat me up and threw me down the barrack steps. This kind of aggressive behavior continued to the point where after duty hours when I would go to the PT field to do extra PT (physical training) to get myself in training for the war, these guys would stone me like the Palestinians stoned the Israelis. Right after they beat me up I started sleeping with my trenching tool under my pillow. That's the shovel that an infantry soldier carries to dig a foxhole and I also stole a bayonets and kept it in my shirt. Now in the United States Army you were not responsible for what you do the first thirty seconds you wake up. So I was waking up a squad member and we would get up at 4:30 in the morning and run five miles before we had breakfast. So I was waking this one soldier up from Baltimore and he had his back to me and he rolls over and punches me in the face and knocks me down. So I said, "Okay, okay, okay." So one day...I didn't see an M-16 until I got to Vietnam. We trained with the M-14, which is a wind rifle that weighs fourteen pounds with a metal buck plate. So one day we're in formation and I say something to Ragger, this man from Baltimore, and

he smashes me in the chest with his weapon as hard as he could. When he did that, a red curtain fell across my eyes.

Ishmael Reed: What did you say to him?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, I'll tell you what I said to him. When he smashed me in the chest like that a red curtain fell across my eyes, and as a red curtain lifted I was in the process of brining bayonets down into his heart and my one Black friend grabbed my wrist and stopped the blade one inch from his heart.

Ishmael Reed: So what was his response?

Lamont Steptoe: It scared the s*** out of him. But the harassment continued until one day we were turning in weapons and several of them began to harass me and I attacked twenty men by myself. They had pushed me to that point where I went berzerk and I attacked twenty men by myself and they were frozen in place. They couldn't do anything as I ran up and down the line attacking them and a White lieutenant who liked me from Philadelphia, second lieutenant who comes from Philadelphia comes running over and says, "Sergeant Steptoe what's going on?" When I told him what's going on he took off his shirt and his helmet line and went up and down the line pushing these soldiers, "If you f*** with him, you gotta f*** with me" and that was my last blow up of my dealing with those twenty-five soldiers.

Ishmael Reed: Did any of the White soldiers of treat you as badly as the Black soldiers?

Lamont Steptoe: Not until Vietnam.

Ishmael Reed: And what happened in Vietnam?

Lamont Steptoe: Um, well, I became a sergeant eventually in Vietnam and I had rednecks underneath me and some of them were so irate that they had to take orders from me, but one instance, I was out in the fire base. The firebase is a smaller base than a division base camp, and told this one guy, you know, "Everyday somebody has to burn shit." So I told this one White guy...there was this White guy was from Michigan that had orders to go burn shit that day. So he grabs his weapon, puts a whole 24-pound clip into his M-16 and around the chamber head started screaming, "I'm tired of taking everybody's orders." So I'm standing their watching this and I have my 45 on my waist and I told him, "You know I could have shot you at any given point." I had loaded the weapon, reached for the weapon, the whole nine yards. "I was thinking of your wife and kids, who you would have probably wanted to see again. So I'm going to walk out of here and I'm going to come back in exactly five minutes and either you will be down there burning shit or you will shoot me or I will shoot you and take you the company headquarters and Court Marshall you're a**." So when I came back he was down there burning shit. So that was one instance. But there were veil threats as more and more of these Southerners came in because I was in Vietnam for sixteen months, remember.

Ishmael Reed: Right.

Lamont Steptoe: As more of these Southerners came in they were always...there was one friend in the dog unit in Vietnam. His name was Dennis Evans, and Dennis Evans loved Black people because he had been orphaned for a minute and it was a Black woman who raised him, so when I was on my way to Hong Kong for R&R I told him, "You know, some of these guys will call you a nigger lover." He said, "Yeah, and when they do, I'm going to beat the s*** out of them." When I came back from Hong Kong they in fact had called him a "nigger lover" and he had to have his word. He beat the s*** out of him. I slept with my 45 under my pillow daily, you know, because I knew that people could flag

whatever or me, so I was always on guard in the barracks and in the bunkers with White troopers that only flew the Confederate flag. So I became more and more aware, and there was an incident in a place called Chu Lai, which is up North where two hundred Black soldiers went to war with White soldiers...

Ishmael Reed: I was going to ask you about that. That was an incident we heard about over here. What happened there?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, you know, in Vietnam, you didn't pass a Black man without giving him the Dha. The Dha was a ritualistic handshake and the word "Dha" means beauty in Vietnamese. You know, there was this cohesion among Black soldiers, and you know I began to see, you know when you're out in the field you don't see many, you don't have that kind of racism show itself, but when you're in barracks, that's when it manifests, when you're back in barracks. I had one White boy tell me, "I'm going to cut your heart out."

Ishmael Reed: Was he lower rank than you?

Lamont Steptoe: No. This was before I became a sergeant.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, so what did you say?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, he would come down to our unit to hang out with White soldiers, and I was around them one day, and something happened, and I started laughing, you know, because he was the butt of the joke, and he looked at me and said, "You're laughing at me, you're laughing at me? I'll cut your f***ing heart out." So, yeah, um, Black soldiers, we had to be on guard, man. In Vietnam I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The wrong place to read that book. So after I read it, the following February, I told the other Black soldiers that we were going to wear Black arm bands on February 21st. So we come out with our Black armbands. My first lieutenant, a guy from Chicago, the first lieutenant Quinn, he says, "You've made your point. Now take it off or I will Court Marshall you." So we took it off, but I think that, I think that resentment manifested in him trying to send me to a very, very dangerous place. The place was called () which in Vietnamese means "Black Virgin Mountain." So if you got orders to go the Black Virgin Mountain, you make sure you came home that night because you might not becoming back the next day.

Ishmael Reed: So that was a way of punishing people?

Lamont Steptoe: Um hm.

Ishmael Reed: So like a death sentence.

Lamont Steptoe: Um hm. Yup.

Ishmael Reed: So what did you do to provoke that, you know, invite that?

Lamont Steptoe: I just think he held this resentment towards me, you know, because of that Black armband.

Ishmael Reed: That was because of Malcolm's death?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Lamont Steptoe: So I get orders to go to Black Virgin Mountain. The first three letters in my book *Uncle South China Seat Nightmare*, one of those letters deals...I wrote the night before I was assigned to go Black Virgin Mountain. Now in Vietnam, at the barracks, at 05:59 I would be dead asleep. At 06:00 my eyes were open and I was on my feet. I maintained this routine for a few months after the war, which freaked my brother out when he witnessed it at home. So someone was supposed to wake me up and drive me to

the chopper pad. I was supposed to be in the chopper pad. I didn't wake up that day until 10AM and when I came out of my hooch my lieutenant went off. I said, "Sir the CQ didn't come to wake me up." Nobody came. It was like there were angels standing around my door. So then he said, "Okay, goddamn it, you're going there on Wednesday.

Ishmael Reed: Where is this guy from?

Lamont Steptoe: Chicago.

Ishmael Reed: So it wasn't just the Southerners.

Lamont Steptoe: No. No. So when I get up there I run into the other dog handler who had been on that operation.

Ishmael Reed: So you had that dog by that time.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, I had the dog for eleven months.

Ishmael Reed: What was the name of the dog again?

Lamont Steptoe: His name was Butch.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, and how did you get assigned to the dog unit? Give me that one more time.

Lamont Steptoe: It was my punishment for dropping out of OCS.

Ishmael Reed: I see, okay, okay.

Lamont Steptoe: So when I got up to the area of operations that Wednesday, the other dog handler said to me, "Steptoe, where were you?" I said, "Oh, man I overslept." He looked at me and he said, "You must have some powerful guardian angels." I said, "Why are you saying that?" It was a hot LZ. The Viet Kong were waiting and so many people got killed, this was a company size unit. You're talking about 200 men. They had to fly in a battalion of 800 men to rescue what was left of that 200 men and I was supposed to be right in the middle of all of that.

Ishmael Reed: So were these other men sitting up there as punishment?

Lamont Steptoe: Oh, yeah. Commanders would do it all of the time.

Ishmael Reed: And they were sending these guys up to be killed.

Lamont Steptoe: Um hm. Yup. Yeah. If somebody didn't like you they could give you orders, just like Solomon did in the Bible when he stole that one soldier's wife. Put him in harms way. Put him on the front lines.

TO BE CONTINUED